

West Chester Young Ladies Seminary  
(Villa Maria Convent)  
300 Maple Avenue, north of Biddle Street  
West Chester Borough  
Chester County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1215

HABS  
PA,  
15-WCHES,  
12-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. PA-1215  
WEST CHESTER YOUNG LADIES SEMINARY  
(VILLA MARIA CONVENT)

PA,  
15-WCHES,  
12-

Street Address: 300 Maple Avenue, West Chester, Chester County, Pa.

Present Owner: Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 300 Maple Avenue, West Chester, Pa.

Present Occupant: Owners

Present Use: Convent

Brief Statement of Significance: This building, designed by Thomas U. Walter, has served as a seminary, school, military academy and a convent and, though modified, was originally a very handsome design.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: West Chester Young Ladies Seminary 1837-1840; Jean Claude Antoine Brunin de Bolmar 1840-1860; Pennsylvania Military Academy 1860-1866; William F. Wyers 1866-1871; Robert M. McLellan 1871-1873; Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary 1873 to date.
2. Date of erection: 1838 by a joint stock company at cost of over \$30,000.
3. Architect: Thomas U. Walter - fee unknown  
Builder, suppliers etc.: Unknown
4. Original plans, construction etc.: Elevation and floor plan (c. 1838); probably Walter himself drew these. In possession of Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. It is built of bricks with a center block and two wings; the center block was topped with a simple cornice. Five small frieze windows were back of cornice on center block originally. Rear wing to the north not on above-mentioned plan, but was there by 1848. Cupola was somewhat similar to that of the Chester County Prison. See attached copy of 1838 advertisement for description of the original building (under Part I, D of this report). Exterior has been very much changed, especially by the addition noted below.
5. Notes on alterations and additions: A mansard roof has been added and a large granite chapel added, the latter in 1914. The cupola has been removed. The interior on the first floor is much as built. The upper floors could not be examined.

6. Important old views and references:

Old views: Circular of the West-Chester Young Ladies' Seminary...., 1838, C. Sherman and Company, Printers, 19 St. James Street, Philadelphia; print used as frontispiece: "West Chester Young Ladies' Seminary at West Chester, Pennsylvania Painted by Thos.B.Ashton. Engraved by J. Sartain."

Oil painting of "Bolmar's Academy for Boys." Original in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa. Elevation of the West Chester Boarding School for Young Ladies. Probably drawn c. 1838 by Thomas U. Walter. Original in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.

Many other views may be seen in school catalogues at the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa.

Sources of information: All to be found in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., unless otherwise noted.

Emma Lydia Bolzair: Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps her Life and Work. 1936. Science Press Company, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

J. Smith Furthey and Gilbert Cope: History of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Louis H. Everts, Philadelphia, Pa., 1881.

G. Carroll Lindsay: Athens on High Street--The Architectural Works of Thomas U. Walter in West Chester, Pennsylvania. 1955. Typed thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, University of Delaware. Copy in the University Library, Newark, Del.

Floor plan of the West Chester Boarding School for Young Ladies. Probably by Thomas U. Walter c. 1838. Original in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.

Classified printed and manuscript files, Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., under headings:  
West Chester.Private Schools-West Chester Young Ladies Seminary  
West Chester.Private Schools-Bolmar  
West Chester.Private Schools-Pennsylvania Military Academy  
West Chester.Private Schools-Villa Maria

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The building was erected by a joint stock company but failed soon due to the financial difficulties of the late 1830's. The school itself received excellent newspaper comment, especially was the work of Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps noted. See bibliography for her biography. The next owner was very well known as a school master and his students came from the eastern United States, with many from the West Indies. Pennsylvania Military Academy (now Pennsylvania Military College in Chester, Pa.) was also very successful, as was William F. Wyers' school. Little is recorded of McClellan's school. Since purchased by the sisterhood in the Roman Catholic Church it has been used very successfully. Catalogues and data on all these schools may be

consulted in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa. A son of the architect himself was a student. Both Mrs. Phelps and Mr. Bolmar wrote and published considerable material.

C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: None known

D. Supplemental Material:

1. "Village Record," West Chester, Pa., September 11, 1838:

"The 'West Chester Young Ladies SEMINARY,'  
IN WEST CHESTER. (Pa.)

"Under the supervision of Dr. J. W. COOK and wife, with whom is associated as principal of the literary department, Mrs. A. H. Lincoln Phelps, late of the Female Seminary at Troy.

"THE boro' of West Chester, in which this Seminary is located, is situated near the Brandywine river, four miles above the battle ground, and is one of the most salubrious, thriving, and pleasant villages in the state. It is a distance of 24 miles west of Philadelphia, and easy of access at all times by means of two daily lines of cars, on the Columbia and West Chester rail roads.

"The buildings have been erected at a large expenditure, on a plan furnished by Thomas U. Walter, Esq. The principal building is 130 feet in length, by 45 in depth, and 4 stories in height, with two galleries, each 100 feet long, and 2 stories high, being sufficient fully to accommodate 200 pupils.

"The extensive grounds, surrounding the school, will be laid out in walks, and planted with trees and shrubbery, for the recreation of the pupils, thereby securing to them all the comforts of a rural dwelling.

"The seminary will be opened on Thursday, the first of November next."

2. "Recorder & Examiner," West Chester, Pa., July 23, 1839:

"SAMUEL WAY vs. The West Chester Young Ladies Seminary.

"In the Court of Common Pleas of Chester county of August term, 1839, No. 72, scire facias, sur Mechanics' Lien, issued July 20, 1839, for work and labor done as a house carpenter in erecting and constructing a certain brick building, the central part thereof fifty feet square and five stories high, with a wing attached to each end, each forty feet long and forty-five feet deep, being four stories high; also two galleries attached, one to each end of the said wings, on the north-westerly side built of brick, each one hundred feet in length, sixteen feet wide, two stories high, together with wash house and oven attached to the north gallery; and known by the name of 'The West Chester Young Ladies' Seminary,' situate in the borough of West Chester, and county aforesaid, on a tract or lot of land, containing about twenty one acres, adjoining lands of the Chester County Silk

Company, Abner Hoopes, Joshua Hoopes and others, together with work and labor done in erecting a fence round the yard and garden attached to the same. Also for work and labor done as a house carpenter, in erecting and constructing a certain spring house, a few perches from the said Seminary, on the same lot, and belonging to the same parties, being two stories high, sixteen by thirty-two feet in size. Also for work and labor done as a house carpenter in erecting and constructing a certain barn a few perches from the said Seminary, on the same lot and belonging to the same parties; being thirty-six feet, one story stone and frame above.

"NOTICE is hereby given to claimants and persons interested in the aforesaid property, that a writ of scire facias, sur mechanics' lien, has issued in the above stated action. to me directed, returnable to said court on the first Monday of August next, when and where they may attend if they think proper, and enter on record their suggestions according to law.

"JOSEPH TAYLOR, Sheriff.

"Sheriff's Office, West Chester,  
July 22, 1839"

Prepared by Bart Anderson - July 1958  
Curator, Chester County Historical Society

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: This building by Thomas U. Walter originally was a monumental, dignified design in Classic Revival and though modified, still retains the planned proportions and massings of elements.
2. Condition of fabric: Good

### B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Original building was 130 feet by 45 feet, with two galleries to the north each 100 feet long and two stories high.
2. Foundations: Stone
3. Wall construction: Red brick originally; now plastered
4. Chimneys: Original chimneys still there, though extended by the mansard roof addition.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Original building has main entrance on the southeast front, as shown in the oil painting mentioned in Part I, A, 6 above.

- b. Windows and shutters: Original building still shows the same window openings as shown in the oil painting (listed under Part I, A, 6 of this report), except for those added by the mansard roof.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Nearly flat - tin covering

- b. Cornice, eaves: Not original

- c. Dormers: Many in the mansard roof, a later addition.

C. Technical Description of Interiors:

- 1. Floor plan: The building now has five stories, including that in the mansard roof. Originally there were four stories in the main section and three in each of the two side wings. As far as one can now investigate, the first floor seems little changed from the original plan by Architect Walter.
- 2. Stairways: The main stairs are the original ones and rise from the floor in two flights to a landing, continuing from there in one flight to the second floor. The entrance floor is simple but impressive.
- 3. Flooring: Wood, at least part of which seems original
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster
- 5. Doorways and doors: First floor, at least, mostly original.
- 6. Trim: First floor, at least, mostly original.
- 7. Hardware: Little left of the original.
- 8. Lighting: Nothing original left.
- 9. Heating: Fireplaces remain on first floor.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: Building faces southeast and still has considerable open space about it.
- 2. Enclosures: Nothing old left.
- 3. Outbuildings: Nothing original left.
- 4. Walks: Some through grounds to the north.
- 5. Landscaping: Originally well landscaped, according to newspaper accounts (see Part I, D of this report). Good shade trees and some shrubbery.